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A Book to Make You Think

The Unequal Burden of Cancer, M Alfred Haynes, Brian D Smedley, Editors, National Academy Press, ISBN 0309071542. 350 pp, \$39.95

Poverty is the most important risk factor for excess morbidity and premature mortality, and it is disproportionately distributed among ethnic groups in the United States and around the world. Moreover, there are striking differences among ethnic groups in the incidence of cancer. Compared with white Americans, Asian Americans have substantially lower, and African Americans substantially higher, incidence of and mortality from prostate cancer.

These are distinct issues, the first arguing forcefully for social justice, and the second allowing intriguing insights into the environmental causes of cancer. *The Unequal Burden of Cancer*, commissioned by the Institute of Medicine of the United States, does not adequately distinguish between the two issues, so that its recommendations, although laudable, may not be as effective as they might have been. The implementation of preventive measures depends on behavioral research that is culturally sensitive, and accessibility and use of medical services need to be studied in the context of their sociocultural environment. However, etiologic research rarely benefits from the inclusion of small groups of people of different ethnic backgrounds, such as a small group of rural Greek women in a large sample of American women. The analysis would have to adjust for ethnic background and the presence of heterogeneity, and the underlying motive of research that is ethnic-specific can rarely be substantiated. The statement of the director of the National Cancer Institute that issues of special interest to different ethnic groups regularly spring from research done in other ethnic groups is no doubt true. For example, the causation of hepatocellular carcinoma by hepatitis B and C viruses, the causation of cancer of the cervix by certain types of human papillomavirus, and poverty as a risk factor of overriding importance for stomach cancer are all findings particularly relevant to poor people and ethnic minorities and all have sprung from research on homogeneous, nonethnically mixed samples.

That said, the book is more interesting than such reports usually are and provides useful information for those interested in the occurrence and control of cancer among various ethnic groups. Several recommendations, particularly those focusing on medical treatment and survival and those criticizing the accounting methods that have been used to assess the ethnic relevance of research sponsored by the National Institutes of Health, are realistic and sound. The book also frequently makes a point that should never be underestimated—that ethnic minorities are minimally different groups of our one race, the human race.

Dimitrios Trichopoulos
Professor of Cancer Prevention and Epidemiology
Harvard School of Public Health, Boston
dimitrio@epi.harvard.edu